

Elusive Answer

James Earl Ray back in spotlight, now near death

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Nashville, Tenn. — On the night of April 21, 1968, James Earl Ray — on the lam after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. — sat in a Toronto bar, drinking a screwdriver as he peered intently at a television screen showing a program called "The FBI." Then came the moment he had suspected might occur: His face flashed across the screen as actor Efrem Zimbalist Jr. revealed that Ray had made the FBI's celebrated "10 most wanted fugitives list."

Ray would later say he was elated by the development — even though it magnified the chances of his arrest. All his adult life, he had been a two-bit hoodlum, pulling small robberies and burglaries, but he aspired to be "somebody." Now, he had made it.

Today, as Ray lies near death in a Nashville hospital, he seems even more of a somebody. Reporters

from across the United States and as far as London are keeping a death watch — filling their publications and airwaves with bulletins on his precarious health. But as much as Ray might appreciate all this attention, he is unaware of it.

"It's true James has always been ambitious," Ray's brother Jerry said in an interview. "And I'm sure he'd like to know about all this commotion. But, even when he's



Jerry Ray

well enough to talk to me, I'm not telling him about it. I don't want him to know how serious his condition is. If I told him about all the news stories, he'd know he's worse off than I've told him."

James Earl Ray, now 68, pleaded guilty unequivocally 27 years ago to King's murder. By doing so, he escaped possible execution and received in exchange a 99-year prison sen-

tence. But the judge's signature on the sentencing decree had barely dried when Ray began claiming he never fired the fatal rifle shot in Memphis — that he was a dupe who had been tricked into participating in an assassination conspiracy and that he had been coerced into the guilty plea.

These circumstances, lending an air of lingering mystery to one of the crimes of the century, account for much of the continuing public fascination with the case. Among the many unanswered questions: Did Ray, indeed, kill King? If so, did he do it alone or as part of a conspiracy? If there was a conspiracy, who were the conspirators? And, if Ray didn't fire the shot that stilled King's heart, who did?

Civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, have expressed hope that Ray will offer a death-bed confession. But Jerry Ray said in an interview Friday in McMinnville, Tenn., about 70 miles south-east of Nashville, that they "better not hold their breaths. In 1978, members of the House assassination

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James Earl Ray in 1991

Newsday
12/29/96

committee offered to get him released from prison if he would confess. If he wouldn't do it then, he sure isn't gonna do it now." There is no public record that any such offer was made.

The man who could resolve many of the unanswered questions lies under heavy guard — drifting in and out of a coma produced by a diseased liver — in Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital.

It is an unremarkable five-story structure, built of sand-colored bricks. Ray is being treated in a prison section that is maintained permanently by the Tennessee Corrections Department. He is locked behind a double set of security doors, and neither will open unless the other is locked. The windows are sealed and reinforced with bulletproof glass. Guards are stationed inside and outside his room, around the clock. They are all aware that Ray has escaped twice from prison — once before the assassination and once after — and made other unsuccessful escape attempts.

Doctors said Ray's condition varies from day to day, even hour to hour. On Thursday, when he emerged from his coma, his brother was there.

"He could talk pretty well," Jerry Ray said. "James and the guard and I were joking around. There's a woman who says she's in love with James. She's been writing to him in prison. Anyway, she showed up at the hospital — just sat around the lobby, saying she wanted to be near him. So I suggested to James and the guard that maybe we could slip the woman up to the room and James could get something going with her." Hearing that, Jerry Ray said, his brother replied: "If you did that, we'd not only have to worry about my liver. We'd have to worry about my heart."

Although James Earl Ray occasionally flashes signs of droll humor, he is by no means lighthearted. Even

before his arrest in the King murder, he had spent much of his adult life in prison. In a 1993 interview with Newsday he displayed an old con's guile as well as a certain crustiness.

"After you've been asked the question a thousand times, it becomes humiliating to have to answer it again," he said. "But no, I did not kill Martin Luther King." Law-enforcement officials, among others, insist he did.

At the time of the assassination, Ray was already a fugitive. His small-time career in crime — which included an arrest for vagrancy and convictions for the burglary of a dry-cleaning store and the holdup of a grocery — had landed him in a Missouri prison. He escaped in 1967 and made his way to Montreal. There, by his account, he met a mysterious character he knew only as Raoul — a man who, he claims, drew him into the assassination.

In the quarter-century since the assassination, not one other person has been found who will attest that Raoul exists. But Ray insists he dealt with him for months. What was Raoul's last name? Ray told Newsday that he had never asked. "I figured if he wanted me to know, he'd tell me," Ray said.

By his account, he engaged in various smuggling ventures with Raoul. He said they smuggled contraband from the United States into Mexico and Canada. When it was pointed out to him that most smuggled merchandise comes into the United States, not out, he said he just did what Raoul told him. And he never asked Raoul, he said, what sort of contraband they were smuggling. It was wrapped up, he said.

Ray contends Raoul told him to go to Birmingham, Ala., and buy a .30-06 Remington rifle, mounted with a high-powered scope, at a sporting goods store. He admits buying the rifle, which has been identified by experts as the murder weapon. He says Raoul wanted



U.S. marshals and sheriff's deputies escort James Earl Ray from jail to the federal courthouse in Memphis, Tenn., in 1974.

AP File Photo

to use the rifle as a demonstration model in a scheme to sell similar weapons on the illicit market. But, asked why there would be an illicit market for rifles that could be bought in sporting goods stores across the country, he replied: "Obviously, Raoul never intended me to do that. That was just his cover story to me." Cover story for what? "To set me up for the murder case," he said.

But he did not realize that at the time, he said, so he continued following Raoul's orders. The next order was to go to Memphis with the rifle and take a room in a boarding house with back windows that overlooked the Lorraine Motel — where King was staying while helping lead a strike by city sanitation workers.

On the night of April 4, 1968, King was standing with aides on a balcony outside Room 306 of the Lorraine. A single shot was fired, apparently from the boarding house. It struck King in the jaw, penetrating his neck and severing his spinal cord — killing him.

The killer left behind an abundance of evidence implicating Ray, who fled Memphis. FBI agents pursued his trail to Canada through several aliases and discovered his actual identity. Eventually, he flew from Toronto to London.

"I figured I was going to get away," Ray would tell his attorney, the late Houston criminal lawyer Percy Foreman. "I thought I could get to Africa and serve two or three years in one of them mercenary armies, and those folks over there wouldn't send me back."

In London, he pulled a bank robbery, but got only about \$240. Scotland Yard detectives found his fingerprints on his holdup note and arrested him June 8 at Heathrow Airport as he tried to board a plane to Brussels under an assumed name.

"Are you Ray?" a detective asked.

"Oh, well, yes I am," Ray replied. "Oh, God, I feel so trapped." He was returned to the United States for prosecution. At one point, he said to Foreman, "I don't suppose I could ever persuade you that I didn't do it?" Foreman said he replied: "You sure couldn't. Not in a thousand years."

Foreman said he told Ray that his only chance to escape execution was to plead guilty. On March 10, 1969, Ray pleaded guilty.

"Has anything been promised to you to get you to plead guilty?" Memphis Judge Preston Battle asked.

"No," Ray said.

"Has any pressure of any kind, by anyone in any way, been used on you to get you to plead guilty?"

"No."

"Are you pleading guilty to murder in the first degree in this case because you killed Doctor Martin Luther King?"

"Yes."

Those seemingly indelible words notwithstanding, Ray soon recanted — claiming the plea had been coerced by Foreman in an attempt to obtain a lucrative movie deal. The recantation fueled the controversy in the case — feeding the conspiracy theories that persist to this day.

From a legal perspective, the case is still alive. Ray's current lawyer, London-based William Pepper, has persuaded a Memphis judge to conduct a February hearing on a motion for a new trial. The chief ground is that there is evidence the bullet that killed King cannot be matched to Ray's rifle. Prosecutors contend the bullet is so mutilated it cannot be matched to any weapon.

"We need new evidence to get a trial," Pepper said in a telephone interview Friday from London. "We contend this is new evidence. We hope James will live long enough so we can give him back his good name."

Jerry Ray showed up for his interview Friday in a red Mercury Marquis bearing a bumper sticker that reads: "Ignore the media. Think for yourself." Ray, an ex-convict himself of burglaries and thefts, is a roly-poly man of 61 with large glasses and a moon face. Confirming the notion that his brother always wanted to be "somebody," he said James Earl Ray served a hitch in the Army clearly so he could qualify for GI loans and start a legitimate business.

"But, by the time he came out of the Army, he had changed. That's when he got into all the trouble. He still wanted to be somebody, but not somebody legitimate."

Asked whether his brother's good name could be restored, Jerry Ray snorted. "He doesn't have a good name."